

# Board Development

## Sustaining Healthy Boards

Behind most effective not-for-profit organizations is a healthy board with an understanding of what it takes to lead in challenging times. Individually and collectively board members are willing to identify the things that are important to the success of the organization. They are also willing to support their beliefs through contributions of time and effort.

What makes a healthy board? How does your board keep itself strong and dynamic? How does it deal with difficult challenges? How does it heal after periods of crisis?

A team is only as strong as its members, yet boards often lose sight of the needs of individual board volunteers. Building a team is also a critical activity. However, in a quest to plan, fundraise, organize, and meet the expectations of the community, the management of human resources within a voluntary organization is often overlooked. Board and frontline volunteers, as well as paid staff, work boundless hours, to meet boundless needs with little attention paid to health.

Ironically, as many board members are burning themselves out others eventually leave because of boredom caused by lack of involvement. Whether by choice or lack of opportunity many board members never fully contribute to the organizations they serve. The unbalanced involvement and workload often takes its toll, not only on individuals, but eventually on the board and the organization's health.

Managing the board's human resources needs to be a shared responsibility, with all board members aware of the need for self care and mutual support. As leaders within the organization and the community, board members cannot always rely on someone else to monitor the satisfaction, health and effectiveness of the board team.

Take time to invest in a strong board.

- Does your board have an annual checkup? Periodic performance reviews of individuals, committees and the board team are important.
- Does the board nourish itself with development opportunities?
- Does your board recognize symptoms of poor health within the board and the organization?
- Are individual board members committed to and satisfied with their board role?
- Is board wellness recognized and celebrated? Or, are only crisis and difficulty acknowledged?

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## Board Development: Sustaining Healthy Boards

### The Need for Recognition

*Lack of recognition is the single most stated reason why people voluntarily leave paid and unpaid work. Meaningful recognition needs to be personalized, timely, and suited to the needs and motivation of the individual.*

*Board efforts often go unrecognized because staff and/or front line volunteers are not aware of board work or are uncomfortable in acknowledging board members.*

*What does your board do to recognize the accomplishments of individual board members? Work groups? Committees?*

## Revitalize: Start today...

- Remind yourself of why you agreed to be a volunteer board member. What was your passion? What were your hopes and dreams? Renew your commitment.
- Praise someone else for helping the organization fulfil its purpose. Put the acknowledgement in writing. A simple note means a lot.
- Revisit your successes. The legacy you and other volunteers leave, makes a huge difference to individuals, your community and the world.
- Show interest in other board members, staff and volunteers. Connecting and relationships are a large part of the satisfaction many people seek in their volunteer roles.
- Make it easy for others to be involved at their own comfort level. Treat each other like valued customers.
- Let individuals know why their role is important and the unique strengths they bring to their board role. Don't forget to count a great sense of humor, perspective, energy and wisdom, when you tally the assets.
- Involve others in planning and decision making. Ownership is a powerful motivator.
- Expect good performance and hold people accountable.
- Evaluate the efforts of the board regularly.
- Be available to your colleagues. The gift of time is priceless.
- Laugh together. Life on a board can be bleak without a little fun.
- Remember most board members are spending their leisure time assisting your organization.

## Build a Foundation to Support Board Health

In the excitement of forming and operating a voluntary organization, it is tempting to devote much of the board's time and effort to "hands-on" work related to the issue which brought you together. Developing a plan and foundations for the future seems frustrating and of low priority.

Developing policies, bylaws and other organizational tools may not be of primary interest. However, boards that invest time and energy in building strong foundations, generally support a healthier organization, able to fulfil the organization's purpose and vision.

- Do your bylaws define clear and limited terms of office for board members? Executive roles?
- Do board members, other volunteers and staff understand their roles so that there is minimal confusion and duplication of effort?

- Does your organization have job descriptions for board members? Executive positions? Are the descriptions current, clear and available to everyone who needs to know? Do they define expectations of each person?
- Do committees have written “terms of reference” that clearly define the purpose, scope and outcomes of its efforts?
- Are policies developed to provide guidance in consistent decision-making rather than “reinventing the wheel” each time issues are discussed?
- Are board recruitment and development considered to be as important as other board responsibilities?
- Does your board take time to plan, or do you wait to react to each new crisis?

What other changes can your board make to strengthen your health, while saving time, money, and energy?

## Partnering for Greater Effectiveness

Does your organizations collaborate with the other community partners? Can you identify the best way for your organization’s volunteers and staff to contribute to your projects? What assets does your group have? What special skills or resources could you contribute? Do you effectively assess the need for your organization to meet needs that can be met in other ways? Cooperative efforts help all voluntary organization more effectively utilize their resources, saving volunteer time and energy.

## Recruiting the Right People

People make organizations effective. The right people. Professional sports teams and corporations spend significant time and effort identifying, recruiting and developing effective coaches and leaders. The actions of board members in a not-for-profit organization, individually and collectively, are just as critical to the health of a voluntary organization. Do you assign your most experienced and enthusiastic board members to the task of recruiting? Do you manage your board human resources as effectively as your other assets? Does your organization make recruitment and development of your leaders a primary focus? The strength and effectiveness of the board begins with recruitment.

## Board Development: Sustaining Healthy Boards

*“We get so totally tied up in today’s needs, that we don’t reserve a realistic part of our resources for developing the talent and dedication necessary to carry and expand the association’s efforts tomorrow.”*

*- Brian O’Connell*

## Dare to Dream

*What would your “ideal” board experience look like? How would board members be treated? How would you work together? How would you get the work of the board done? What would you feel about your volunteer role and the organization you support?*

## Board Development: Sustaining Healthy Boards

### Commitment Beyond Loyalty

*“It’s useful for managers to think of employees the way nonprofits think of volunteers. Volunteers don’t act just out of loyalty. They act out of commitment, which is what companies need today. Committed employees and volunteers question why things are done as they are. They demand meaning and purpose. Once they “buy in”, they’ll do whatever it takes to get the job done.”*

*William Bridges,  
author of the best-seller  
Job Shift*

## Meetings Matter

Consider the impact of board related meetings on individual board members. Much board work is accomplished through meetings and much board work is not accomplished because of meetings.

- Are the length, frequency and time of your meetings suited to the needs of board members?
- Are board activities held in a convenient location where transportation, parking, security and other access issues are considered?
- Is board information circulated well before meetings so it can be read and considered without stress and inconvenience? Is it presented in a format suited to the needs of board members?
- Would variety revitalize meetings? Rotating chairperson role? A different meeting setting?
- Is discussion focused on board business? Could the agenda be streamlined?
- What would make you enjoy board meetings more?

## Committees Count

Effective use of committees, as the work unit of the board, can help reduce the workload on individual board members and the board as a whole. Recruit skilled community resource people as committee members. Board members need not sit on numerous committees. To provide for continuity and communication, the Committee Chairperson should be a board member. With careful selection and a clear term of reference, you can build a strong team. Utilizing non-board members on committees introduces new people to your organization and develops potential future board members. They also bring diverse skills, perspective, and contacts to your group.

Effective committees, with a clear purpose can research, review, plan and recommend, specific to their function, to support the board in making good decisions.

## New Ways of Working

As in the paid work world, the way in which we perform our volunteer roles is changing. Multiple responsibilities, rapid change, and varied lifestyles all make it difficult to commit the time and energy required to effectively tackle board work.

Consider how your board might use:

**Job Sharing:** formally share a board or committee leadership role by dividing the role by function. For example, two individuals might co-chair a committee. One might chair meetings while their partner is more able to fulfil the day to day functions of the role. In other situations an individual might choose to divide their role seasonally. One might act as Secretary in the spring and fall, but have their job sharing partner take over for the months that they travel. Board members who deal with challenges to their health and energy levels are often able to contribute in a job share arrangements with fewer demands.

**Temporary Work Teams:** An adhoc committee is an efficient work unit for busy people who cannot make commitments to longer term responsibilities. Does your board use adhoc groups instead of Standing Committees, when appropriate? Are your Standing Committees relevant to current organizational needs? Boards frequently maintain redundant committees, which may have been highly effective in the past, but are no longer needed because of new needs or a different volunteer/staff structure. Redundant committees waste time and energy, demotivate volunteers, and often cost a great deal to maintain.

**“Shared” Board Members:** Many individuals are motivated by a particular aspect of board work. It may be pioneering a new organization, it may be coordinating major fundraisers, or it could be strategic planning. When your organization can no longer provide challenges for such individuals, and a second term is unlikely, why not promote exchanges with like-minded groups? By promoting opportunities in other organizations you assist volunteers a identify meaningful board work, which benefits the community. Your organization will likely gain in return. Both organizations provide revitalizing development opportunities to valued members.

## Board Development: Sustaining Healthy Boards

### Sharing the Load

*Board volunteers often burn themselves out by continually adding to their list of responsibilities. They find it difficult to involve others and eventually, despite good intentions, find themselves unable to cope.*

*Do you recognize any of the following blocks to sharing your workload?*

- *I might lose power or control if I wasn't involved*
- *I want to keep all the things I enjoy doing.*
- *I don't have time to orient or train someone else. It's easier to do it myself.*
- *If you want it done right, do it yourself.*
- *We've always done it that way. A new person wouldn't know how.*

*How would your board and organization gain from more even distribution of work and responsibility? Ask yourself why a task cannot be shared or delegated, the next time you are tempted to say yes!*

## **Growing With the Role**

As board volunteers develop within their roles, the needs, issues, and passion which initially motivated them to join the board may change or disappear. The organization must make new challenges and experiences available to sustain involvement. Conversely, some individuals may find their responsibilities overwhelming in terms of time and/or skills.

Asking each board member what they want to be involved in, and determining what roles best match their interests and skills, can be done in a number of ways. The board and committee chairs might regularly review the satisfaction of members, with regard to their volunteer roles. Regular self evaluation opportunities also encourage effective placement and development.

Many people thrive on change, while others like routine. Some are motivated by working with others, while some like to work independently. The key to maintaining high levels of involvement is to make sure that different and changing needs are recognized and met.

Life changes like retirement, parenthood, divorce, or unemployment all impact the needs of board volunteers. How can your board most effectively use the strengths of each person on your team?

*“One of the constant lessons of leadership is that people grow with responsibility and are capable of far more than appears on the surface.”*

- Brian O’Connell

### **Something to Think About...**

#### **Celebrate Your Success!**

As the saying goes, “Don’t forget to stop and smell the roses.” In an increasingly complex and demanding community, it is easy to use all of the board’s time and energy meeting the challenges of leadership. Does your board recognize what you accomplish individually and as a group? Do you enjoy the *journey* to a goal; as well as the *destination*? A capital fundraising campaign, the startup period of a new group, or the construction of a new facility are difficult challenges. Celebrate the milestones along the way. Why not celebrate a new set of bylaws, the election of a new executive, the completion of a strategic plan? More importantly, celebrate the difference you make in the community. Celebrate healthier communities, protected environment, the joy of music or a safer world for our children. That’s what it’s really about!

*“Most people do not drop out from overwork. They drop out from boredom.”*

- Harold Seymour

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